

† B A R T H O L O M E W

By the Mercy of God,

Archbishop of Constantinople-New Rome, and Ecumenical Patriarch,

To all the Faithful of the Church:

Grace, mercy, and peace from the Creator of all Creation

Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ¹

September 1, 2005

DOING, NOT JUST SAYING

The earth, having no tongue cries out sighing, why are
you people polluting me with many evil things? (*9th Ode,
Earthquake of October 26*)

In a very pictorial way, the holy hymnographer Joseph² presents the earth as grieving and protesting voicelessly for the many evils with which we burden her. If this holy hymnographer thought back then that the pollution of earth by humankind would cause the wrath of God, today, humanity in its entirety should all the more realize our ultimate destructive behaviour against the creation of God.

Certainly, the earth was created well-equipped to offer shelter to the human beings and was ordered by God to cover their needs. However, we do not draw from earth's resources what we need in moderation, so that we allow its productive ability to remain sound and intact; instead, we are depleting her natural resources. We draw so much to such excess and in such rough ways that we weaken her abilities and destroy all future production of natural resources. In doing so, we resemble those

¹ The customary address and introduction of encyclical letters on the occasion of the opening of the ecclesiastical year on September 1, which also marks the prescribed day of prayer for the protection and preservation of the natural environment in the Orthodox Church.

² A ninth-century monk and liturgical poet of Byzantium.

who act greedily, and who, when in need of collecting wood, destroy both the trees and the forest and, thus, deprive themselves of the opportunity to collect more wood in the future. It is a known historical fact that many areas of the earth that had once been sites of developed civilizations, ended up in total devastation.

This phenomenon of devastation, which unfolded slowly in earlier times, is progressing in our times at a high speed. Vast expanses around polluting factories and industrial zones that emit toxic waste have already been deadened, and the number of such dead expanses is constantly growing. Huge regions have been made subject to deforestation in order to be used as cultivation grounds, but the utilization of toxic pesticides has destroyed any form of sprouting, except for the object needed. These non-biodegradable toxic pesticides enter the water-air cycle and pollute the springs and rivers causing severe problems to human health. In regard to the consequences of these methods employed and materials used, greed and negligence take their revenge. While we work hard to increase the productive ability of our planet, we, on the other hand, destroy it. Astronauts who have observed the whole earth from a distance while in orbit, drew humankind's attention to the fact that huge expanses of it have been deforested and will end up in devastation.

The aforementioned holy hymnographer Joseph personifies earth, which, addressing man, complains that the Master of humankind and God whips her instead of him, for God wants to spare the human being; the earth, however, bemoans her suffering due to humankind's mistakes and cries to people: "Come to your senses and appease God in repentance." This invitation is quite timely. We must realize the forthcoming danger; we must understand its causes and acknowledge our responsibility. We must aim to appease God, not through words and small sacrifices, but through courageous acts and large sacrifices. For the promise of the Lord that we will receive back in multiple that which we sacrifice, applies here as well.

The Mother Church is fully aware of the dangers that threaten the earth and our surrounding natural environment brought about by both the natural ramifications of human acts but, mostly, by the moral consequences of human crimes; therefore, the Mother Church established the 1st of September as a day of prayer for the environment. Prayer appeases God, however there is also validity in the saying of ancient Greeks: “In addition to asking for help from goddess Athena offer also your own effort.” This saying is similar to the biblical phrase “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much” (James 5:16). The importance of this sentence lies on the word “effectual”, which means that the prayer is more powerful when accompanied by actions for the one for whom we are praying. For there is no vindication for the one who says “Lord, Lord,” but rather for the one who does the will of God. In our discussion, it is evident that the will of God mandates the preservation of the eternal yielding of our natural resources, respect toward the natural creation of God and our future generations, and the reversal of our destructive behaviour against the very good natural environment that was given to us by God.